

## REPRESENTATIONS OF EXILE IN IAN MCEWAN'S FICTION

Alina Buzarna-Tihenea  
Ovidius University, Constanța

Starting writing and publishing fiction in the mid-1970s, McEwan is an author who gradually became concerned with historical, political and social issues, and with their impact on individual identity. In his fiction, which has provoked "cultural debates and moral outcries" (Groes 1), the political chaos of contemporary society, social mentalities and taboos, weaknesses and faults affect the individual, sometimes leading to his or her exile, either imposed, self-imposed, emotional or physical.

The novelist's privilege, according to Ian McEwan, is to step into the consciousness of others and to lead the reader there, like "a psychological Virgil" (Groes vii). McEwan's novels are explorations of individuals, relationships and society within both a claustrophobic private sphere and a public one; moreover, the former is mirrored into the latter as a way of addressing broader social and political issues. The author places his protagonists in an unfamiliar world, where they feel isolated and where they are forced to look inwards. (Acheson 2).

In Ian McEwan's fiction, dominant political ideologies of 1980s Britain (*The Child in Time*), post-war British communism (*Black Dogs*), the horrors of World War II and its legacy of (*Black Dogs*, *Atonement*), the fall of the Berlin Wall (*Black Dogs*) - all act upon individual identity, changing and corrupting it. Moreover, in certain situations, they induce individuals a state of alienation, of isolation, of inner exile or even send them away from their environment. Within this eventful world's "heart of darkness" and hues of exile, the individual's identity changes and becomes corrupted, degraded: displaced "innocent" young men became vicious murderers and body dismemberers (*The Innocent*), self-isolated adolescent and apparently "normal" children become incestuous (*The Cement Garden*), young 13 years old imaginative girls destroy genuine love relationships and send innocent young men to prison and then to exile in war (*Atonement*), mysterious encounters change one's view upon the world and lead to the separation of just married couples (*Black Dogs*).

Since the Antiquity, the term exile has been associated with the idea of loss, isolation or separation, both from a certain place and from the self (Lagos-Pope 7). Exile, in the broadest terms, is the forced separation of a person from the community and of inhabiting a place while wishing for

another and while either being explicitly refused permission to return and/or being threatened by prison or death upon return. Thus, exile implies a physical separation from the place where one previously lived (Forsdyke 7-8). In Ancient Greece, exile was practiced mainly in cases of homicide. In Rome, exile was a means of avoiding the death penalty: before the pronouncement of the death sentence, a Roman citizen could escape by voluntary exile. Later, there were introduced different degrees of exile, such as temporary or permanent exile, exile with or without loss of citizenship, and exile with or without confiscation of property. As an alternative to capital punishment, the English law developed the practice of banishing criminals, derived from the Anglo-Saxon sentence of outlawry. Thus, by the 18th century, English convicts were being deported to penal colonies in North America and Australia, a practice which ended in 1868. In the 20th century, exile took the form of a frequently used sentence for political offences, a famous destination being the Russian region of Siberia (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Exile, which, in its various forms, is “a recurrent human experience” (Lagos-Pope 7), can also be practiced as form of protest or in order to avoid persecution, by means of a self-imposed departure from one’s homeland or as physical or psychical isolation from the surrounding world (self-exile).

Elizabeth Montes Garces, in *Relocating Identities in Latin American Cultures*, argues that the experience of exile can be related to a traumatic event, i.e. the breach with the known localities of the subject and the experience of displacement to the land of asylum. This trauma can be seen as:

an indirect violence originated in the sudden and radical transformation of the surrounding world and the expectations of the ordinary life (...). Under these circumstances, the world of the present is transformed into something foreign and menacing. (Montes Garces 55-56)

In different ways, most of Ian McEwan’s novels are about trauma, emotional isolation and loss of innocence and explore the inner states and transformations of the characters experiencing traumatic events. For instance, the central protagonists of *Atonement* have their lives ruined by the traumatic wrongful arrest of Robbie on charges of rape, which leads to different forms of exile: Robbie’s imposed exile, Briony’s self-imposed exile as a form of self-punishment and search for atonement and Cecilia’s self-imposed exile as a form of protest. Robbie is sent to prison for a deed he had not committed; in order to escape prison, he goes to war and he is sent to fight in France. His experience in France can be seen as a form of exile, as he is forcibly uprooted from his community as a form of punishment, while

he wishes to return to England and see Cecilia again. In her turn, Briony exiles herself in an attempt to atone her deed of false incrimination, by forswearing Cambridge and by dedicating herself to nursing. Cecilia also exiles herself, in a form of protest against her family's wrongfulness and chooses to become a war-time nurse.

Another example concerning the interrelation between trauma and exile is given in *The Cement Garden* by the experience of the orphaned children, who succumb to the trauma of losing their both parents. Finding themselves into a household where adult control and rules disappeared, the children isolate themselves from the rest of the world and create their own, corrupted version of family and norms.

In Ian McEwan's fiction, as a result of "the demise of their accustomed world", the characters are isolated with internal conflicts and they are involuntarily forced to reassess their lives, their existence and their relationships with the people they love (Hoi Jensen 11).

In *The Innocent*, relocation induces this type of transformation, and the passage from innocence to a state which cannot be labelled as experience in the proper sense. In order to engage with society and its values and to show the tensions between the public and the private words against the background of relocation, in *The Innocent*, McEwan creates Leonard Marnham, a post-office telephone technician in his mid twenties who has come to Berlin to help tap Russian phone lines, and who falls in love with Maria Eckdorf, a 30 year old German divorcee. Marnham's role in the Operation Gold project, his relationship with his American superior, his love affair with the experienced Maria and the confrontation with her brutal ex-husband Otto reflect the tensions between the British, American and German nations, at the higher level of the public sphere, and the impact of these tensions induced by displacement on the individual and on his or her private relationships (with the focus on Leonard Marnham and Maria Eckdorf).

Leonard Marnham, presented as an innocent from several points of view, is exposed to a wide range of new experiences during his stay in Berlin; this experience of displacement makes him to reassess his life and relationships. During his stay in Berlin, Leonard readjusts and reconsiders his identity. His inexperience is emphasized from the very beginning: for instance, he does not know how to cope with his American boss's abrasiveness; he has never received an insult since becoming an adult; he lacks sexual experience and, at the beginning, he does not know how to behave in Maria's presence. As he comforts Maria, beaten up by her ex-husband Otto, he thinks about how little he knows about people and what they are capable of. He also asks her: "Why am I so ignorant?"; her answer to this question is: "Not ignorant. Innocent" (*The Innocent* 158). In David Malcolm's view, it is this innocence, this naiveté that is dismantled in the

course of the novel; nevertheless, whether this dismantling is an improvement is open to question (126).

The so-called “relocation” of Leonard in Berlin certainly changes him. His relationship with his boss – Glass – and the other colleagues from the tunnel is an initiation into the worlds of politics, war and espionage. His relationship with Maria is an initiation into knowledge of a woman, of sex, of kinds of physical and emotional experiences he has never enjoyed. This relationship brings him to serious emotions which he expresses in a way that he could never have done previously. The day-to-day routines of their life together make Leonard feel “grown-up at last” and even “civilized”.

However, Leonard’s relocation and movement from innocence also brings with it inner conflicts and dark experiences: rape fantasies induced by the interiorization of history and politics (he places himself in the role of the British conqueror and thinks of Maria as the subdued Germany), jealousy of Glass, and finally the cast into a nightmare of grotesque violence in the murder and dismemberment of Otto (symbolizing the vanquished Germany and the thorn up Berlin). Nevertheless, at the end of it all, Leonard remains, in a certain sense, still innocent (Malcolm 127). He asserts his lack of guilt for several times. For instance, as the U.S. guards try to open the case containing Otto’s cut-up body, Leonard thinks: “He had done his best, and he knew he was not a particularly bad person” (*The Innocent* 226). Later he makes in his imagination a long speech, trying to explain his actions and their causes and to deny his guilt: “He was innocent”, he thinks to himself, “that he knew” (*The Innocent* 240-241). The novel leaves the debate open to the reader. Did Leonard’s relocation lead to experience? And if he gained experience, did it worth the loss of his innocence?

From this point of view, *The Innocent* tells the story of an encounter with history and experience and studies the concepts of innocence and guilt in relation to the broader historical and political background of the Cold War. The novel mirrors the struggles between the personal and the social, and follows Leonard as he tries to cope with all these tensions and with his experience of displacement, to reach to an inner balance.

According to Andrew Brennan, identity is associated with elements such as language, surroundings, the space in which we live and the objects that offer us a sense of familiarity, of continuity. The critic further claims:

When this state is interrupted unexpectedly and a sudden change occurs, the imbalance produced by the abruptness of such a change could create a situation where (...) the individual can find himself/herself trying to balance the “self” (...). The exile determines the need to create a sense of balance between the “self” and the new environment. As a consequence of this process, the identity of the individual has to be readjusted and reconsidered (...).

Consciously or unconsciously, the self in exile tries to reach out for memories, those faulty recollections that in time escape and betray the self, playing tricks on those who try intensely to keep them in order and to protect everything as it was, at least in one's mind. This is a constant battle in exile. (85-87)

Such examples of the need to create a sense of balance between the self and the new environment and of attempting to protect everything as it was are given by *The Cement Garden* and *Atonement*.

As already stated, in *The Cement Garden*, after the death of their parents, adolescent and apparently "normal" children isolate themselves from the world and become incestuous, in their attempt to preserve the state of being before the death of their parents. Thus, the suddenly abandoned and isolated orphaned children revert to "a somnambulant state", deep inside their home, escaping reality, accountable to nobody, free from the obligation to mature and completely paralyzed (Ryan 19).

McEwan creates "a vast and aching nothingness"; in this secluded, claustrophobic world, the children snap rudely at each other and complain about the monotony of their isolation (Slay 37-38). They also lose the sense of time, which emphasizes their self-isolation: in the novel there are predominantly internal frames of reference, which take the form of phrases such as "in the early summer of my fourteenth year (*The Cement Garden* 13), "during the following year" (*The Cement Garden* 25), "shortly before my fifteenth birthday" (*The Cement Garden* 26), "three years later" (*The Cement Garden* 59), "three weeks after Mother died" (*The Cement Garden* 91). It is as if the children have lost any connection with any established, external framework of things; the novel's action seems suspended in its own time (Malcolm 54).

Furthermore, the claustrophobic old house is "built to look a little like a castle, with thick walls and squat windows". This exiled desolate suburban fortress stands alone on an empty street, surrounded by a wasteland of rubble and burnt-out prefabs. Even before the parents die, the reclusive family has neither friends nor relatives, nor visitors. Critic Kiernan Ryan observed that for almost the entire duration of the narrative, the reader is "imprisoned" inside this secluded household with these few characters. "Once left to themselves, the children withdraw still further into physical and emotional recesses, within their insulated domestic retreat" (Ryan 19-20).

Since ancient times, space has been an important category of Western thinking and of the Western perception on life and the world. In the binary tradition of a world built on the principle of opposition, space is also interpreted in a dual manner. The classical spatial opposition is that between openness and closure, antonyms which also imply several deconstructionist

interpretations. For instance, closure, the surrounded, imprisoned space symbolizes anti-conviviality, danger, isolation. On the other hand, enclosure also means protection from the intrusive gaze of strangers (Chetrescu 158-159). The children's world transforms into an increasingly enclosed space, which suffocates and alienates them; at the same time, this space also protects them against the apocalyptic wasteland lying beyond the walls of their household.

When Mother finally dies in her bedroom after a painful, wasting illness, Jack persuades his siblings that the only way to prevent their being separated by the authorities is to isolate themselves and to hide the fact of her death. They carry her body down to the cellar, place it in their father's huge tin trunk, and pour cement over it. This grotesque act symbolizes the banishment of their dead mother from their minds. In bringing Mother's corpse down from the upstairs bedroom and burying it in the basement, the children physically enact the metaphorical exile of the lost mother in the unconscious (Ryan 20). The children also isolate and exclude each other. For instance, Jack takes perverse pleasure when his sisters catalogue him as filth, because of his greasy hair, filthy fingernails, smelly feet, and yellow teeth. Jack's dirtiness deepens his isolation, separates him further from Julie, Sue and Tom.

The critic Jack Slay claims that a consequence of Jack's self-alienation is his loneliness. Early in the novel, Jack says: "I had no close friends at school" (*The Cement Garden* 26). After Mother's death, his isolation becomes exclusion, as Julie and Sue increasingly choose to avoid him, to omit him from their conversations, their activities, and their lives. At Mother's death, the sisters only console each other; Jack tries to share their sorrow, but they do not notice him. Instead, the girls draw closer together, sharing secrets, discussing boys, dressing Tom. Jack's isolation then becomes more of a burden than an act of defiance, and he begins to make conscious efforts to be included; however, with the outsider Derek's arrival, he becomes even more abandoned, saying at one point that he feels isolated from everyone he knew (Slay 43). This state of isolation is broken by the arrival of authorities, by the penetration of the outsiders within the children's secluded and claustrophobic world.

As already mentioned, in *Atonement*, the effect of isolation is apparent when Briony, a young 13 years old imaginative girl wrongfully accuses her sister's lover, Robbie Turner, of rape, destroying thus a genuine love and sending an innocent man to prison and then to war; Robbie and Cecilia are isolated as a result therefore; furthermore, Cecilia also exiles herself from the family, in a form of protest. Later, in order to make amends, Briony exiles herself from her family. During her self-imposed exile, Briony's experience of nursing the dying from Dunkirk contributes to her maturation. By focusing on Briony and her inner life, the author creates "a

spotlight on her claustrophobically circumscribed world” (Groes 65). And because “exile from a homeland, though obviously a distressing experience, can bring a writer into a fruitful or at least a usefully problematic, relationship with an adopted language” (McEwan, “Mother Tongue”), this girl turns eventually to be a successful writer. In the end, it is revealed that the entire story was imagined by Briony, who reveals in the last part of the book that Cecilia and Robbie were both killed in the war, and had never reunited. Briony laments over her wrongful act, being aware that there is no real atonement for denying them their happiness.

While the children in *The Cement Garden* bury their mother in the basement, in order to protect everything as it was, to stick to the status quo of their childhood, in *Atonement*, by writing the novel, Briony tries to atone her false incriminations and to recreate a sense of balance between the self and the new environment: i.e. the new situation she created by incriminating Robbie and by isolating him from Cecilia. Exiled, Briony’s self tries to reach out for and also to fabricate new memories and a new reality in order to recreate order and to redress the situation, to bring it to a state similar to the previous one, at least in her own imagination. In his turn, during his constant battle in the exile at Dunkirk, Robbie thinks about Cecilia and tries to reach out for memories, which keep him moving on, giving him the hope that he will soon return to England, where Cecilia is waiting for him, and where order, balance and happiness will be re-established for both of them. Nonetheless, these faulty recollections escape and betray Robbie’s self, becoming delirious states during his last hours in Dunkirk.

In his novels, McEwan deals with the political chaos of contemporary society, trying to demonstrate how this turmoil negatively affects both nations and individuals, both private and international relationships. Against the diversified background of contemporary fiction, crowded with major global events and their wider matrix of socio-political and cultural meanings (Groes 2), in McEwan’s fiction, either emotional or physical, exile and its figurative forms – isolation and re-location – affect individuals, corrupting their identities, provoking their loss of innocence (as it happens in *The Innocent* and in *The Cement Garden*), and also represent a means for atonement and an attempt of redressing, of keeping thing in order, of protecting everything as it was, at least in one’s mind (*Atonement*, *The Cement Garden*). The link and the tension between individual and society, against the modern historical and social background presented in Ian McEwan’s fiction, reveal how the latter affects one’s identity and how identity, in its turn, reflects mentalities, social constraints, and the never-ending struggles between the personal and the social, within a modern and troubled society.

## WORKS CITED

- Acheson, James, C. E. Sarah Ross. *The Contemporary British Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- Brennan, Andrew. *Conditions of Identity: A Study in Identity and Survival*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988.
- Chetrinescu, Dana. "Rethinking Spatiality: The Degraded Body in Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*". *B. A. S.: British and American Studies/Revista de Studii Britanice si Americane* 7 (2001): 157-165.
- Cohen, Anthony P. *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Forsdyke, Sara. *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Groes, Sebastian, ed. *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.
- Hoi Jensen, Morten. *The Effects of Conflict in the Novels of Ian McEwan*. 15 May 2009 <<http://www.ianmcewan.com/bib/articles/Jensen.pdf>>.
- Kiernan Ryan. *Ian McEwan*. Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1994.
- Lagos-Pope, Maria-Ines. *Exile in Literature*. London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1988.
- McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. London: Vintage, 2002.
- . *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage, 1997.
- . *The Innocent*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990.
- Malcolm, David. *Understanding Ian McEwan*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2002.
- McEwan, Ian. "Mother Tongue". *Ian McEwan.com*. 29 August 2009. <<http://www.ianmcewan.com/bib/articles/mother-tongue.html>>.
- Montes Garces Elizabeth, ed. *Relocating Identities in Latin American Cultures*. University of Calgary Press, 2007.
- Slay, Jack Jr. *Ian McEwan*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.
- "Exile and Banishment." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 10 September 2009. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/198072/exile>>.